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AUTHOR Nichols, Ann Eljenholm
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ABSTRACT

Montessori language lessons, which antedate Silent Way methodology by 50 years, offer a solution to some of the problems facing elementary school teachers of English as a second language (ESL). The limited amount of class time available with mixed-proficiency students is a particular problem. The basic principles of a Montessori lesson, the three-period presentation, isolation of difficulty, control of error, and relative silence of the teacher, enable the student to work independently yet purposefully. Sample ESL lessons based on Montessori principles are supplied, and a list of Montessori works is appended. (Author/MSE)

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MONTESSORI LANGUAGE LESSONS: The Almost Silent Way

Ann Eljenholm Nichols

Montessori language lessons, which antedate Silent Way methodology by fifty years, offer a solution to some of the problems facing ESL elementary teachers, in particular limited time with mixed-proficiency students. The basic principles of a Montessori lesson, the three period presentation, isolation of difficulty, control of error, and relative silence of the teacher, enable the student to work independently yet purposefully. Sample ESL lessons based on Montessori principles are supplied. A list of Montessori's works is appended.

Most ESL teachers know about Gattegno's Silent Way because of the work of Earl W. Stevick (1980:37-82). Few teachers, however, know much about Maria Montessori, and even Stevick seems not to know of Gattengo's indebtedness to her. I first became interested in Montessori twenty-five years ago. I was a graduate student in linguistics when a friend and mother of two small children gave me a copy of The Montessori Method and asked me if what Montessori said made any sense. Allowing for a certain Italianate style preserved by her translator, she did indeed make sense, particularly in what she had to say about language. First, her description of Italian was linguistically sound; second, what she said about language learning sounded remarkably like some of the work I had just been reading in linguistics. Marveling, for example, at the child's ability to absorb language, she concluded: "This is not the result of conscious work. It is something done at the unconscious level of the mind. It begins and unfolds in the darkest depths of the

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Ann Eljenholm Nichols teaches ESL at Winona State University.

unconscious, and when it emerges it is as a fixed acquisition" (1967:111).

After twenty years of teaching and relying on a number of Montessori techniques, I can still reaffirm my initial evaluation. Montessori makes sense, not just in a Montessori classroom, but in any classroom. Montessori makes particular sense for ESL elementary teachers who face the sort of problems described by Marsha Santelli (1982:5): low budgets, hostile classroom teachers, limited time with students, and mixed proficiency levels.

Montessori had enormous respect for the child, not a vague, amorphous aren't-children-wonderful sort of respect, but respect for the child's mind. Because of this she believed that all real education was self-education: "Education is not something which the teacher does, but ... a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being" (1967:8). Because of this respect for the child as an active agent, the adult in a Montessori classroom is never called a teacher, but rather a director or directress, someone who prepares the materials by which children can learn and teach themselves.[1] This may sound incredibly idealistic, but Montessori did not develop her theory in the ivory tower of a middle class drawing room; she developed it working with the SLBP students (students with special learning or behavior problems) of her day.

Born in 1870, Maria Montessori was the first woman in Italy to become a doctor. It was her medical training, more than anything else, I believe, that developed in her an ability essential to good teaching, the ability to observe accurately and

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[1]Gattegno's position is remarklably similar: "Everyone of us enters school knowing how to be a responsible learner, an independent judge, an autonomous judge. . ." (1970:67); "... no doctoral student in a university has ever done as good a job equivalent to what we all did when we were one and two years of age, finding by ourselves how to acquire the extremely complicated system called language" (1970:11).

objectively. Montessori must have been a very tenacious young woman to pursue studies and succeed in a field that had hitherto belonged only to men. Having completed her studies, she worked at a number of part-time positions, at the Spiritu Sancto Hospital in Rome and also as an assistant at a psychiatric clinic. There she was given what must have been the least attractive work, dealing with what were then called idiot children, the "unteachables." In 1898 Montessori delivered a paper at the Pedagogical Congress in Turin in which she argued that the children she had been seeing as a medical doctor were not unteachable, that what they needed was educational care rather than medical. As a result of this paper she was asked by the Minister of Education to set up a training school for teachers of such children, work that developed into the State Orthophrenic School. There Montessori worked herself from eight in the morning until seven at night. She later referred to the two years she worked there as "my first and indeed my true degree in pedagogy" (1909:32). It was during this time that Montessori first began to produce the didactic materials still found in Montessori classrooms all over the world.

CHARACTERISTICS OF MONTESSORI LANGUAGE LESSONS

The Three-period Lesson

In her early work at the State Orthophrenic School, Montessori had read about and been influenced by Seguin's pioneering efforts in sensory education (1812-1880). In his work with the deaf Seguin developed a three-period lesson: first, teach the child to associate a sensory perception with a name; second, test to see whether the child can still associate the name with the perception; and finally, test whether the child can produce the name belonging to the perception. The lesson must

focus on only one sense perception at a time.[2] For teaching colors Montessori developed a set of wooden tablets identical except for color. They are introduced to a child as follows.

First Period:	red (or This is red.) blue (or This is blue.)	The teacher articulates carefully while pointing to each tablet.
Second Period:	Show me the red.	(or Give me the red tablet.)
	Show me the blue.	(or Give me the blue tablet.)
Third Period:	Which is this?	(or Which color is this?)

It is only in the third period that the child must speak. In a second lesson on color the teacher might begin with the second stage for review.

Because the three-period lesson is so simple, teachers sometimes think that it only belongs at an elementary level. Actually it is useful in all disciplines at all levels. All teachers, of course, use the first phase, but many skip phase two altogether, and others use phase three only on test days. I believe that many students would do better at algebra, geometry, biology or chemistry if their teachers used all three phases.

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[2]Montessorians call this the isolation of difficulty or the principle of simplicity. Stevick aptly calls it the "one thing at a time" principle (1980:44, 78). He has an equally aphoristic label for the three period lesson: "teach then test" (1980:56).

Silence

A Montessori lesson always begins and ends in silence. Furthermore, in the three-period naming lesson the child is not required to produce the new word(s) until phase three. It is now generally accepted that forcing a language learner to speak too soon may be detrimental, that the child learner of a second language, in particular, should be allowed to remain constructively silent (Gingras 1978; Day 1981). Thus contemporary research supports a basic principle of Montessori education. The lesson also proceeds very slowly.

Silence is, of course, what has given Gattegno's methodology its name. Actually, the silence in the Montessori method has always seemed natural to me, unlike that of the Silent Way, which sometimes seems contrived. For example, although a Montessori teacher will often use gestures rather than speech, they are never used just to avoid speech but rather to avoid distracting the child from the object being perceived. Both Montessori and Gattegno are at one, however, in wishing the child to be independent. The silence of the teacher is one of the things that makes this possible. The silence also enables the teacher to observe the students more perceptively. "The teacher whose work is subordinate to the work of her students must be continually learning from them about where they are--must be constantly 'learning them,' so to speak, at the same time that the students are learning the subject matter" (Stevick 1980:45).

A NAMING LESSON

Let us look at a naming lesson in more detail. Say that I wish to introduce the names for the attributes thick and thin to children who have already learned the names of the geometric shapes. I choose for materials a set of attribute blocks - blue plastic circles, squares, rectangles, and triangles, half of which are 1 cm thick, and the other half .25 cm thick. I sit facing the children at a small table or on the floor. I say nothing, but carefully and slowly place the box in the center of the

demonstration area. Slowly I remove the lid and put it under the box. Next, and equally slowly, I take out one thick circle, look at it carefully, rub my finger vertically over the side, and then say thick. (If the word involves sounds which are difficult for the children, I repeat the last two steps.) Then I carefully lay the thick circle down. Next I repeat the procedure with a thin circle. The exercise continues until all the thick figures are in one row and all the thin in another. The only words that are spoken are those specified by the three period lesson.

I have noticed that whenever a well-trained Montessori teacher demonstrates such a lesson to adults, they become restless; they are ill at ease, even impatient with the slowness and silence of the presentation. Yet is it the silence that enables the child to isolate a sense perception before a new word is attached to it. This silence is also enormously restful for children bombarded with a strange language at the same time they are trying to cope with teachers and peers in a foreign culture. Montessori loved to quote Dante to her teachers, "Let thy words be counted," or to use her words, "The more carefully we cut away useless words, the more perfect will become the lesson" (1970:108).

ADOPTING AND ADAPTING MONTESSORI IN ESL TEACHING

Once teachers understand the basic principles involved in a Montessori lesson (teach one thing at a time, cut away all useless words), they can easily create their own language activities from materials already available in their schools. (In fact, in some of the best Montessori training schools, trainees are required to make many of their own materials so that they will better understand the principles involved.) Math materials are invaluable for language lessons, for example, attribute blocks, geometric solids, or Cuisenaire rods, the famous colored

rods of the Silent Way.[3] The only other materials needed are colored cards for labels, clear contact paper to cover the labels, and storage containers.

THREE MORE SAMPLE LESSONS

Teaching Ordinal Numbers: A Sequence of Lessons

Materials Needed:
- five or six Cuisenaire rods of the same color
- five or six rods, each a different color
- word cards for first, second, third, ... sixth
- the box or bag in which the rods are kept

Lesson 1: Use one color of rods -- all orange, for example. Arrange them in a row. Use the three-period naming technique to teach first, second, etc. Label the rods with word cards.

Lesson 2: Use rods in a variety of colors; follow the same procedure as in Lesson 1.

Lesson 3: This lesson can follow immediately after Lesson 2 or be used for review another day. Give the following commands: Give (child's name) the third rod . Put the fifth rod in the box (or bag). Make the second rod first.

The last command is more complicated than the others; it was

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[3]Gattegno coauthored a basic manual for the use of the colored rods (1954). The rods, however, were developed by the Belgian G. Cuisenaire and are marketed under his name.

actually produced by a child using the materials and started a marvelous group game. This sort of student-initiated activity is typical of Montessori lessons.

Lesson 4: Additional materials: word cards, several each color, the, rod, is, blue, red, orange, etc.

> Lay out the materials as in Lesson 2. Point to one of the rods, saying "Tell me about this rod." Lay out the word cards and construct the appropriate sentence.

Many Montessori activities involve writing and reading, the composing of sentences preceding reading. The "tell me" formula used in this lesson is a useful way of introducing such activities. If the child should respond not in a complete sentence but with something like "second blue," the teacher completes the predication, "The second rod is blue." Since the rod already has the label second placed above or below it, the teacher now picks up the label, repeating the word second. As the word cards for the sentence are arranged, the teacher should pronounce each word carefully, inviting the child to "read" with her. The cards can then be mixed up, the child rearranging them to form the descriptive sentence. (Since this lesson involves five or six sentences, it is necessary to keep the words sorted, for example, all the color words in one box or Ziploc bag.) Finally, the child can copy the sentence to practice spelling and handwriting.

Once these materials have been presented, children can work independently, arranging the six rods in any sequence and writing sentences about them. Since it takes relatively little time to present the lessons, the teacher is able to work effectively with a number of different students grouped by proficiency. Furthermore, the reading/writing activities can be used independently in the regular classroom while the classroom teacher works with mainstream lessons. All the classroom teachers needs to do is to provide a corner of a shelf where the

ESL materials can be kept. Once classroom teachers realize that these materials make their work easier, a spirit of cooperation between specialist and nonspecialist teachers can develop in place of the wary indifference and hostility so often complained of.

Teaching Fractional Numbers: From Sentence to Paragraph

Materials needed: two each of brown, yellow, and orange rods

word cards: brown
yellow
orange
one-third
are] three each

Set out the rods in a row in random color order:

brown yellow orange brown orange yellow

Say, "tell me about the rods." (If necessary, ask how many rods there are, what colors they are, and how many there are of each color.) Have the students write out sentences as they compose them. (The lesson may be stopped at this point and continued later. Save the written text so that the random order can be reconstructed.)

Now, without speaking, regroup the rods as follows:

brown brown yellow yellow orange orange

Say, "There are three colors -- brown, yellow, and orange." Label each color group one-third, and compose sentences with the cards:

brown brown yellow yellow orange orange

One-third are brown. One-third are yellow. One-third are orange. Finally, add these three new sentences to the earliest ones.

The result is a model descriptive paragraph, something like this:

> There are six rods. The first and fourth rods are brown. The second and sixth rods are yellow. The third and fifth rods are orange. There are three colors, brown, yellow, and orange. One-thid of the rods are brown, one-third are yellow, and one-third are orange.

Help the child reread the entire paragraph outloud. As the child reads the rods should be rearranged to match the original order: the first and fourth rods are brown, etc. This activity tests both reading ability and comprehension of ordinality.

It is instructive to note a parallel between this typical Montessori activity and recent communication-oriented ESL texts with similar activities. These texts, for example, ask students to label diagrams of physical objects using a written description for data and conversely to write descriptions from a labeled diagram (Allen and Widdowson, 1974; Maclean, 1975).

Once an activity like the preceding one on fractional numbers has been introduced to the children, it can be stored in a tell-me box on the ESL shelf in the regular classroom for independent use. The tell-me label tells the child to repat the activity which the ESL teacher initiated with the phrase, "Tell me about ...." The child constructs a physical model, labels the objects, and writes a description of the model. During the next ESL lesson, the student begins by reading the description and reconstructing the model for the teacher. If the child's penmanship is clear enough, students can exchange descriptions, build models, and check each other's work. In this way the children take control of their own learning activities requiring less and less direct supervision the from ESL specialist at this stage of their work.

If, after an initial presentation of the fractional lesson, the teachers feels that a child needs to review the material, the same six rods and cards should be placed in the tell-me box. Otherwise the ESL teacher should change the colors, number of

rods, and the ratios. This particular activity is a popular one with students. In fact, it is not unusual for non-ESL students to become equally fascinated by the Cuisenaire rods, thus providing a common interest for communication between native and nonnative speakers.

Noun Phrase Lessons

In the preceding exercises the physical objects, in addition to providing a perceptual basis for the language lesson, also make the lesson self-correcting. Since it is not always feasible to use such objects, color coding can also control error; for example, in this lesson it focuses on determiner distribution. One color of card is used for the plural count nouns, a second for the nouncount; a later, more difficult lesson would include singular count nouns as well. Quantifier colors match the color of the subclass of noun they pattern with.[4] At the first stage this is primarily a matching activity.

on	a little	snow	on	a few	snowflakes
blue	not much	furniture	white	many	chairs
cards	some	tea	cards	several	cups of tea

Other nouns can be added to the list, particularly those the children meet in their school environment. Once the pattern is acquired, the color coding can be eliminated, all the quantifiers and nouns being written on white card. The learner's initial task is to sort the words into two classes, the quantifiers and the nouns. For independent work it is wise to provide a

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[4] A few, many, and several can only pattern with plural count nouns; a little and not much only with noncount nouns. Although some has no such limitation, it is included in this lesson because of its common use with noncount nouns.

framework such as a sorting sheet, a large piece of paper on which the work can be done. Grammatical labels are not necessary, though it is easy to see how these materials could also be used in a three period grammar lesson.

Figure 1
Sorting Sheet for Noun Phrase Lesson

Words like a little/many	Words like fun/parties
Phrases like a little fun	Phrases like many parties

This type of sorting and classifying exercise is more than a language lesson. It also prepares children to deal with a culture that values classification and for higher education where success in large part depends on the ability to move from the specific to the general and back again.

Similar noun phrase activities can be devised for use with

the attribute blocks described earlier.[5] Each of the geometric figures comes in seven editions, large/small, thick/thin, red/yellow/blue. Thus students are able to construct noun phrases with a series of modifiers, for example the large, thick, blue triangle. By selecting different combinations of the blocks, teachers can create about one hundred different activities. For unsupervised classroom use, the teacher can set up simple classifying exercises like "Put all the thick blocks together," or for more advanced pupils add a tell-me paragraph assignment. And the children, too, will create their own activities; I once worked with a group of children who invented a lotto-game with the blocks: Do you have a large, thin, yellow circle? Whenever children take charge of their own education in this way, teachers can be pleased at their success. For the teacher's task, according to Montessori, is not to talk but "to prepare and arrange" activities so that the chld can use inner resources to direct language learning (1909:8).

LEARNING MORE ABOUT MONTESSORI METHODS

Teachers often ask how they can learn more about Montessori methods, and so I have included a Montessori bibliography. However, the best way to learn about Montessori education is to observe it in action. Minnesota teachers are fortunate because of the large number of Montessori schools in the state, particularly in the Twin Cities vicinity. Normally observations are limited, so people wishing to visit should make

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[5]If the school does not have attribute blocks, I would recommend that ESL teachers buy their own sets. Herder and Herder, for example, markets a small edition called Logical Blocks as part of their Mathematics Experience Program.

an appointment in advance.[6] It is advisable, too, to make sure that the school is affiliated with either the AMI (Association Montessori Internatinale) or the AMA (American Montessori Association). Schools without one of these affiliations may bear the Montessori name without practicing Montessori principles.

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[6] I have visited Montessori schools in Europe and in a number of different states. I am, however, particularly grateful to Pat and Larry Schafer of the Lake Country Day School in the Twin Cities for what I learned during a two-week visit to their school, and especially to Antoinette Gomez Blane, the directress for eight years of the Delahanty Montessori School in Winona.

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